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Visual Methodologies: Photo-Elicitation in the University Classroom

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Abstract: Photo-elicitation as a qualitative research technique has attracted considerable attention. It is generally agreed that photo-elicitation is not applicable to all topics, and it is seldom the researcher's only tool, however, there are substantial benefits when the topic is appropriate and when incorporated with other tools. Although receiving scant attention, photo-elicitation techniques can also be applied within the university classroom. With this lack of attention in mind, this paper will discuss the application of photo-elicitation techniques as a learning tool within university classrooms. Photographs can quickly introduce students to a large amount of visual data and when the photographs are strategically chosen can generate interest, reflection, propagate questions and generate quality classroom discussion. An objective of photo-elicitations within the classroom is to improve not only individual knowledge but also the collective knowledge within the classroom. This paper will outline a marketing lecturer's experiences of photo-elicitation techniques within the classroom. The paper discusses three broad areas: the justification for photo-elicitation; building photo-elicitation techniques into a teaching plan; and the presentation and analysis of student comments. From a technology perspective, photo-elicitation is now within the reach of most lecturers and students. Moreover, the widespread adoption of enabling technologies outside the classroom has increased the potential value of photo-elicitation as a teaching and learning tool.

Keywords: photo-elicitation, class participation, enhancing recall, marketing

1. Photo-elicitation as a research tool

Photo-elicitation is a qualitative research tool that has attracted considerable attention over many years. Harper (2002) attributes the term, photo-elicitation, to John Collier, a photographer, researcher and long-standing advocate for visual methodologies. According to Hall (1986), Collier developed a heightened sense of the visual world after a childhood accident damaged his hearing. Collier was influenced by the photo-documentation of Balinese children by Bateson and Mead (1942) and noted that photographs captured a moment in time and gave that moment permanence; thus allowing the moment to be revisited and re-evaluated by others (Collier and Collier, 1986). Fortunately, for future researchers, Collier chose to share his heightened sense of the visual world over many years. Collier (1957) concluded that the benefits of photo-elicitation are a more structured, focussed, expansive interview where participation is accelerated, more involving, and more energetic. He stated that when employed in a group situation, photographs propagated an interactive and more public discussion. A photograph, according to Collier (1957: 859)

> *"commands interest, deflects digression, and helps the interview to proceed on its meaningful way… A photograph is an abstraction. No matter how familiar the object or situation portrayed may be, a photograph is a restatement of reality; it presents life around us in new, objective, and arresting dimensions, and can stimulate the informant to discuss the world about him as if observing it for the first time".*

It is important to stress that photo-elicitation it is not about *a photograph* but the *right photograph*; the right photograph is one that has the ability to create an interactive conversation through well crafted questions (Suchar,1997). Photo-elicitation is about "asking and answering questions", therefore, congruency with the research topic and careful selection of photographs are key success factors (Suchar, 1997: 34).

The source of the photographs can be the participant or external to the participant, for example the researcher, or a third party (Rose, 2007). When the source of the photographs is the participant, then it is likely the participant is familiar with the topic, and photo-elicitation provides a method of learning from the participant. However, Belk (1991) warns that selected photographs often present how the participant wishes to be seen and seldom include the unhappy and everyday. Barthes (1981) agrees and additionally presents the view that the technical quality of the professional carefully managed photograph may not be as revealing as the spontaneous photograph that captures the truth of the moment. Whilst photo-elicitation can help people to articulate the familiar, photo-elicitation can also help to make sense of the unfamiliar (Harper, 1994). Photographs taken by the researcher or a third party provide the opportunity to introduce topics that the participant may be unfamiliar with. Becoming aware and making

sense of the unfamiliar through third party photographs has long captured people's attention through photo-journalism and photo-essays (Ng, 2006).

One benefit of photo-elicitation is that it tends to slow down the pace of the interview and allows the participant to consider the image (Liebenberg, 2009) and often consider topics they would not normally consider (Binn and Harrist, 1991). Zaltman (2003) argues that photographs are effective research tools as they trigger memories and require cognitive processing to determine the embedded meaning. This echoes Collier and Collier (1986) who state that photographs first require decoding and then translation into words. Zaltman and Coulter (1995) argue that employing photographs as verbal prompts is a particularly useful method as memories are stored, not as words, but as mental pictures. Loeffler, (2005) argues that photographs are mental anchors that capture the moment and permit future narratives.

In marketing research photographs are useful prompts for reliving the consumption experience (Holbrook and Kuwaharar, 1998) and place factors (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008). Heisley and Levy, (1991) and Samuels (2004) found that photo-elicited interviews were richer and deeper when compared to verbal interviews. In addition, Ziller (1990) found photo-elicitation interviews were a more productive use of time. Others found that photo-elicitation was a useful tool for propagating discussion with those normally reluctant to talk due to ethnicity (Eckhardt, 2004) and age (Drew, Duncan, and Sawyer, 2010). One reason may be that photo-elicitation can also create a more equal relationship between the researcher and the participant and this can create an environment where both parties work towards a common goal (Pink, 2001).

Although the benefits of photo-elicitation are well regarded, sadly many photo elicitation studies are presented as text dominant reports and often exclude the photographs that generated the discussion (Holbrook and Kuwaharar, 1998; Harper, 2002; Rose, 2007). This is an important point as it is the mix of non-verbal and verbal communication that creates supporting and supplementary knowledge (Rose, 2007). Ketelle (2010) agrees, and emphasises the need for a synergistic and symbiotic relationship between text and photographs. This iterative relationship suggests there are grounded elements to the photo-elicitation discussion (Suchar, 1997).

2. Living in a visual world

The digital camera and the ability to easily view and share photographs have created a more visual world. Some professional photographers may see this dramatic shift in distribution of images as an end of an era. In recent years photo-magazines have moved from a print format to a digital format (e.g., Life magazine is now available as a Life app). Interestingly, the original meaning of magazine (e.g., Gentleman's Magazine; the first to use the term magazine) as a place to store images and illustrations is probably more correct for digital magazines as it is now possible to store, catalogue and preview thousands of images without leaving the home or office. In addition, online sites (e.g., Corbis) allow professional photographers wider distribution of their images. Other online sites (e.g., flickr,) allow photographers, to easily display and view images. Social networking sites provide everyone, with a digital camera and/or mobile phone, with the ability to communicate with the outside world non-verbally through photographs and verbally through text.

The link between verbal and non-verbal messages in presentations has gained much attention. One group that promotes this style of communication is PechaKucha, a world-wide group that meets in 376 cities. The idea behind this group is to present in a faster, more vivid, and lucid manner. The basic concept is to use 20 image rich slides and speak for 20 seconds per slide (see www.pecha-kucha.org). However, there is little audience participation with this style, in fact comments from the audience would be considered rude and an interruption to the fast paced style. This example highlights an important point of difference between this stand and deliver style with visual aids and the use of photo-elicitation techniques within the classroom. Photo-elicitation explores the images, engages the students and asks purposeful questions to ensure a learning environment.

3. Building photo-elicitation techniques into a teaching plan

Although photo-elicitation as a research tool has received appropriate attention employing it within the university classroom has received scant attention. The researcher and the lecturer who employ photo-elicitation tactics have similar goals; both wish to employ photographs to increase involvement and the quality of the information. Consider this scene from the movie The da Vinci code.

In an early scene Professor Robert Langdon [played by Tom Hanks] is presenting a lecture to a group of students. The scene is to establish Langdon's credibility and authority on the topic of symbolism. Central to his presentation is a slide-show of images that Langdon uses to elicit responses, pose questions for general reflection and generate further discussion. Langdon's presentation mirrors the photo-elicitation techniques employed by researchers; to engage with participants in his class he is using non-verbal and verbal communication. Although Langdon is familiar with the images his students are being introduced to a new topic of study through non-verbal and verbal information working together.

In this more visual world, Grady (2004, p.18) promotes the use of "visual evidence" to communicate. He states that photographs provide an enormous amount of objective and subjective information which when thought, discussed and reported can make a topic more "vivid and lucid". When non-verbal and verbal information work together it can have an "additive effect on recall" (Paivio, 1991: 259). With these qualities Grady (2004) argues that photographs are an ideal teaching tool; photographs can be displayed and discussed in a collaborative manner and can bring about greater understanding. Grady (2004) also cautions that teaching through visual evidence is a craft that must be learned and a life-long learning journey involving careful planning and practice. Krauss, Salame, and Goodwyn (2010: 72) suggest that photographs, when used like a case study, are an efficient and effective teaching tool . Their argument is that "if a picture is worth a thousand words, [then] think about how long it takes your students to read a thousand words". They state that carefully chosen photographs can reinforce theory, provide a context to apply the theory, and will aid recall.

It is also important to stress that using photo-elicitation techniques becomes more of a journey than a destination; as there is always a desire to improve the transfer of knowledge. Photographs that were once deemed as acceptable are periodically replaced. There is a constant search for photographs that provide a better example, highlight a point more clearly or are more interesting and relevant to the class. Assessing students' work takes on a new meaning whilst it provides the opportunity to mark a student's work it also provides the opportunity for self-assessment and continuous improvement. To this end, the photo-elicitation lecturer will have a list of future images that must be captured, and will also be prepared to capture those unexpected photo opportunities (small digital cameras are easily carried). Once taken, photographs need to be catalogued and stored and this requires careful planning to ensure that they are easily searchable and retrievable. External portable hard-drives are excellent for this task and are easily backed up for safety.

3.1 Applying photo-elicitation in the classroom

The paper will now discuss three ways to employ photo-elicitation techniques within the university classroom. It should be highlighted that what may be suitable in the author's marketing management class may not be transferrable to all subjects. Furthermore, it should also be stated that photo-elicitation is a teaching tool, but, it is not the only tool and it should be part of an overall teaching plan. Krauss et al (2007) found it best before or after theory discussion.

The first example is a typical example of one that can be employed within the normal class to introduce and explain theory, the next example is to reinforce theory in the form of a student assignment, and the third example is how to employ these techniques to evaluate learning in an exam setting.

3.1.1 Introducing and explaining theory through photographs

Figure 1 demonstrates a number of marketing concepts, including, managing capacity and demand in a seasonal business. The starting point is to introduce the photograph to enable discussion to commence in a relaxed manner.

> *"I took this photograph in Guildford, England. Has anyone ever been barge boating?*

Different answers depending on the class

> *"Can anyone tell what season this picture was taken?*
>
> *Winter.*
>
> *How can you tell that?*
>
> *There are no leaves on the trees.*
>
> *Well done -What else can you see?*

Well all the boats are all tied up and there are no people around. If it were summer the boats would all be out.

Good. I want to ask you this - do you think that the owner could hire out boats in winter by reducing the price?

Not in England, it would be too cold and uncomfortable.

Figure 1: Typical photograph for photo-elicitation activity

Other questions include: When would people find barge boating attractive? When would a discount start to work? Who would be the target market? What does this mean for peak season – what must the owner do to ensure maximum return on his assets? So what do you think the owner is doing at the time this picture was taken – what would you be doing? Would the owner be incurring any costs during winter? How would you determine your break-even point? How do you think people find out about this business? Have I missed anything?

An important task when using photo-elicitation techniques in the classroom is to prepare a bank of questions, be attentive, and be flexible.

Preparing questions - Introducing the unfamiliar: Marketing students generally have more experiences as consumers than as marketing managers, therefore framing questions as if the students are the manager of this business is important as it improves their ability to recognize a situation and apply theory to that situation.

Be attentive - When the class is asked - *Has anyone ever been barge boating?* The lecturer must be prepared to allow students to share their experiences. The lecturer must listen and be prepared to learn from the students. Acknowledging the contribution the students have made is important as it sends a message to other students that this is a place of learning and participation is appreciated and welcomed. Furthermore, it reinforces the message that the collective knowledge is generally greater than individual knowledge (Surowiecki, 2004).

Be flexible – The lecturer will need to control the discussion on some occasions whilst at other times allow the class to discuss the topic. Often the students take over the discussion and ask other students the questions particularly if it appears the student is more knowledgeable [with many consumption experiences they are].

3.1.2 Employing photo-elicitation to reinforce learning and increase collective knowledge

The affordability and convenience of digital cameras, the availability of image software, and the ability to print A2 colour posters, relatively cheaply, makes the photo-essay an ideal student assignment. Unlike the traditional 2000 word essay a photo-essay requires the lecturer to provide the skills necessary for all students to create a photo-essay and print it in a poster format. Students were shown how PowerPoint could be used to complete this task, simply by amending the page size and page orientation. Other students wished to learn desktop publishing skills and separate classes were conducted. The key point is to display previous student's work and demonstrate to the class what is expected and required at different grade levels. Students must be made aware that the photo-essay is a demonstration of learning and the student must demonstrate they have studied their way through the task and met the learning outcomes of the unit. Photo-essays have a major advantage over the traditional 2000 word essay. Photo-essays are easily displayed on the walls of the classroom and this gives the opportunity for the lecturer and other students to listen to how students approached the assignment topic and this open forum provides the opportunity to ask questions. The learning objective of the open forum is to improve the collective knowledge of the class.

Figure 2: This student has been able to use a collection of photographs to synthesise three marketing concepts

Figure 3: A student explains how he has amalgamated the participation pyramid of sport and Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Figure 4: Students discussing their work and providing feedback

3.1.3 Using photo-elicitation techniques in an exam

There are a number of ways to use photo-elicitation techniques in an exam setting; one method is outlined below. As stated earlier, photo-elicitation techniques may not be transferable across all disciplines.

Often students understand the theory, however, under exam conditions, a number of students find it difficult to apply the theory and provide examples. This is especially true of overseas students who in addition to language challenges are often unfamiliar with local examples. Often under exam conditions, overseas students resort to the presentation of rote learnt lists. However, these lists may not fully demonstrate their knowledge of the topic. One way to make exams more equitable is to source corporate material that is suitable for analysis. The author has found travel brochures are particularly helpful for the discipline of marketing. Within travel brochures are a wide variety of marketing topics; including the value proposition, segmentation strategies, positioning strategies, pricing strategies, core and supplementary product components, and customer management (see Royal Caribbean Cruise Ltd).

Travel brochures are ideal for both photo-elicitation activities in the classroom; however, they are also ideal in an exam. At the beginning of the exam each student is issued with an identical travel brochure, an exam booklet and the exam questions. Students are encouraged to highlight and make comments within the travel brochure and to refer to a particular page when answering questions. As photographs and diagrams are used extensively in travel brochures students are encouraged to refer to these wherever possible. Under exam conditions this allows the student to focus on demonstrating their knowledge through supplied examples rather than spending time considering an appropriate example.

4. The presentation and analysis of student comments

The student comments that are listed below come from three sources an in-class survey, a university generated survey on unit quality, and emails sent by students to the lecturer. The comments are presented to demonstrate that many of the qualities sought by the photo-elicitation researcher can be achieved in a classroom setting.

4.1.1 In-class survey

A questionnaire was handed to students two weeks after the presentation of the student photo-essay assignment. Although participation in the survey was encouraged it was also voluntary, 58 responses were received out of 110 students. There was an overall sense that this assignment format was a welcome break from the traditional essay. A number of recurring themes emerged. The themes include a sense of accomplishment on learning new skills, applying learning to the familiar, learning as the assignment progressed, increased recall of concepts, a demonstration of the synergistic and symbiotic relationship between photographs and text, increased collaboration between students, public display increased assignment effort, public display increased collective knowledge, importance of time management and planning, and for some – embarrassment, and a cost. Student details were collected during this survey; however, students did not have to identify themselves. Interestingly, the comments

from overseas students were extremely positive and the few negative comments came from Australian male students. Student comments included:

> *When finished I had a sense of accomplishment.*
>
> *I enjoyed the compliments when students said they enjoyed my work.*
>
> *I had a business in mind and was able to apply my learning to something I was interested in.*
>
> *It was only after I had finished my poster and looked at it did I realise what I had learned. I found this special and unique.*
>
> *It was fun and I learned things.*
>
> *The small amount of text for each photo meant you had to seriously consider what to write.*
>
> *Photos and text provided a clearer picture.*
>
> *I can recall this assignment more than written assignments*
>
> *I brainstormed with friends, made a list, took the photos, selected the most suitable, then arranged the photos in sequence.*
>
> *Because they were shown in class I had to consider the audience*
>
> *I put more effort in because it was shown to the entire class.*
>
> *A good picture attracts the attention of other students and then they ask you to explain.*
>
> *I had to learn new skills. I even spent time online on how to take good photographs*
>
> *Seeing other student's work helped me understand how I would do things differently in the future.*
>
> *It was embarrassing for some. You could see who left their assignments till the last moment.*
>
> *I found it time consuming and it did not enhance my learning.*
>
> *For me the cost of printing was an issue.*

4.1.2 Student comments from the university generated survey

An online survey is available to all students for all units undertaken at Edith Cowan University. The survey measures the quality of learning and teaching for each unit. Student participation is encouraged, however, it is voluntary. The survey comprises both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative data for this approach showed a much higher level of satisfaction than school, faculty and university averages. However, some of this information would be considered confidential and therefore, cannot be discussed further. Within the qualitative component the recurring themes are that the class found photographs interesting, the presentation style engaging, they welcomed photographs to introduce and review theory, reduced student fatigue was noted, and the creativity with photo-essay assignment was a welcome relief from the traditional essay assignment. Student comments included:

> *Interesting lecture slides; I really liked that the lecturer used photos in his slides etc. that he actually took himself. I enjoyed how he included real life stories and experiences as examples to back up what he was teaching us, this made class a lot more exciting and enjoyable. Also making it easier to visualise. The lecturer made the unit exciting and fun.*
>
> *The lecturer made it interesting by getting the whole class involved by asking questions.*
>
> *The lecturer always welcomed questions.*
>
> *The lecturer presented wonderful examples in the classroom. I appreciate his efforts for bringing the concepts in an easy and understandable way to us.*
>
> *I found the class engaging, and stimulating which is imperative in the evening after a hard days work.*
>
> *The lecture style made it a very enjoyable class. I looked forward to coming every week!*
>
> *The photographs tied different subjects together and made it easy to understand how they were interconnected. I loved this unit!*
>
> *The overheads and the lecturer were very easy to understand and explained complex problems with simple and easy examples. I enjoyed his use of real life photographs and personal experiences.*

The classes were very interactive, I think doing this made the classes more enjoyable and people were involved and paying attention constantly.

This is awesome. I also really like the fact that we got to do an assignment that included photos we had taken ourselves… This allowed us to put an artistic twist to our assignments. I had fun doing this.

The photo-essay was fun and we got to show our creative sides. Not just boring one assignment format (essay).

I appreciated the creativity in the assignments.

The best part of this unit was it was interactive and creative.

4.1.3 Student comments from emails

Students often comment on their personal experiences with a unit. Most comments came from students who wished to provide feedback and be part of a continuous improvement process. The recurring themes are that a photo-essay assignment needs more consideration and planning than a written essay, they noted the ability of images to improve recall, how viewing other student's work can improve learning, and how photographs encourage students to consider a marketing situation deeper. Student comments included:

I really find using images beneficial when I am doing an assignment. It makes me really have to think about what the topic is - to be able to understand and take a photograph that would capture the meaning. I think that using photographs and having an opportunity to express something in a form other then words is also a nice change at university. I also find that when studying later down the track it is easier to remember a single image and the meaning behind it than paragraph after paragraph in a textbook.

I found that by using images, photos, etc gave me a better understanding of the unit content. For example, I was able to understand the participation pyramid a lot better after looking at another student's poster which showed a detailed and creative way of explaining the participation pyramid [see figure 3]. Not only this but in the lecturer's presentation I found that images definitely helped aid the unit content and in my case gave me a better understanding of what I was being taught.

As someone who learns 'visually' I found that demonstrating theory through the use of images and photographs enhanced and improved my understanding of the unit concepts. I also feel that the use of images improves memory retention of the concepts and simply makes the assignments more fun. I also find the use of images to demonstrate unit concepts, encourages you to think outside of the box and develop more unique and creative work.

5. Conclusions

When appropriate to the topic, photo-elicitation can be applied as a research and teaching tool. Photo-elicitation is seldom the researcher's only tool and likewise it should be a component of an overall teaching plan. Photo-elicitation within the university classroom is beyond placing images within a PowerPoint presentation. Like its research cousin, photo-elicitation in the classroom is an interactive activity used to introduce theory, provide examples of theory, and to summarise theory through images. In addition photo-elicitation is an iterative approach that includes the lecturer, the students, the photographic data and the unit theory. It is about the recognition that learning increases with interest and involvement and that for many recall is improved through images than words alone. Student participation is central to photo-elicitation as it is through making sense of the photographs that the theory becomes real, therefore, it has a grounded element.

Photo-elicitation is not a destination but a journey. Lecturers can begin the journey by incorporating photo-elicitation into their classroom teaching and build it up to an appropriate level as resources are gathered. Photo-elicitation within the classroom requires continuous monitoring to ensure that the learning objectives are achieved. It should also be noted that some photographs will become obsolete and therefore evaluation of photographs is a constant process.

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